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SUBJECT: BIHAR SEES A SIGNIFICANT RISE IN POLIO CASES IN 2007

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¶1. (U) Summary: Compared to 2006, the state of Bihar saw a significant rise in polio cases in 2007 of nearly 43 percent. Because of the increase in the number of cases, UNICEF and the Bihar Public Health Department, following Indian Expert Advisory Group on Polio guidelines, have stepped-up their polio vaccinations and information campaign efforts. On January 13, the government launched a special anti-polio drive in the 70 village blocks that have reported the highest number of polio cases. Bihar health department officials have told Post that they believe the spread of polio will be controlled in 2008, but the sharp rise in the number of cases from 2005-2007 indicates that further, sustained attention is needed to fully eradicate the polio virus in and around Bihar. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In 2007, Bihar recorded 398 polio cases out of a total of 756 cases India-wide. In 2006, Bihar reported 61 cases of polio out of a total of 676 in India, double the 2005 number. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh represent 95 percent of India's 756 polio cases reported in 2007. Bihar's total of 396 is a significant, approximately 43 percent increase from 2006 figures. Of the 398 cases in Bihar in 2007, 41 are of the P1-type virus and 357 are P3-type cases. (Note: one child had both the viruses P1 as well as P3 and is listed as both P1 and P3. All 61 cases in Bihar in 2006 were P1. End Note.)

¶3. (U) The Bihar government, along with UNICEF, has decided to conduct monthly polio vaccination rounds in 2008 (there were 11 rounds in 2007). On January 13 Bihar launched a special anti-polio drive in the 70 blocks in Bihar which reported the most polio cases. In 2007, 90 percent of the P1 cases were found in these blocks. Devastating floods from an unusually heavy monsoon season in 2007 displaced hundreds of thousands of people across the state and the region. Bihar health officials pointed to stagnant pools left behind by floodwaters and contaminated wells as breeding grounds for disease and felt that the flooding was a significant contributor to the 2007 rise in polio cases. Another concern for Bihar is the state boundary with Uttar Pradesh and the frequent inter-state movement among populations in the border districts which helps spread the virus. (Note: On January 30, Kolkata newspapers wrote that a Bihari boy who had recently migrated to W. Bengal tested positive for the P3 strain of the polio virus. End note.).

¶3. (U) UNICEF representatives told Post that the rise in new polio cases were a stumbling block in their polio eradication efforts. Most of the polio cases were detected in the districts of Araria, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Siwan, East Champaran, Madhepura

and Sitamarhi (north of the Ganges river and the capital, Patna). UNICEF has increased its awareness campaigns about polio and is holding a number of seminars and workshops in January. They are also working with Bihar health officials to provide more vaccinators at the village-level. On January 6, National Cadet Corps volunteers embarked on a week-long bicycle expedition covering 600 kilometers covering ten districts, including Vaishali, Nawada, Gaya and Nalanda. Over 20 million children under five years were scheduled to receive oral polio vaccines.

¶4. (U) Comment: Although polio eradication efforts continue with some success in India, an impoverished, flood-prone state like Bihar still faces difficulty in controlling the spread of virus. Natural disasters like the 2007 flooding are common and can undermine the achievements of prior years. With a population of 80 million, the high rate of migration of Biharis to and from Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India also makes vaccination programs more difficult to implement. While UNICEF and the Bihar government have made inroads and have shown great commitment, the sharp rise in the number of cases from 2005-2007 indicates that further, sustained attention is needed to fully eradicate the polio virus in and around Bihar.

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